



Everything Michigan

Conyers, local Muslims celebrate Ramadan on Capitol Hill

By DEE-ANN DURBIN
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WASHINGTON (AP) -- A room normally reserved for congressional hearings echoed with Arabic calls to prayer Wednesday as House lawmakers joined about 75 local Muslims for a Ramadan feast.

Guests prayed at sundown before breaking their daylong fast at an elaborate spread that included stuffed grape leaves, dates and a foot-high replica of the Capitol carved in white chocolate. Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan, which ends Nov. 25.

Rep. John Conyers, D-Detroit, was among the organizers of the event, which was held in the House Judiciary Committee hearing room. Conyers is the top Democrat on the Judiciary Committee.

"We're working on behalf of religious tolerance," Conyers said. "It is critical that that be done, because America is still a melting pot. We are a nation of immigrants."

Conyers said he was saddened a recent report from the State Department's advisory group on Arab and Muslim affairs that said few people in Arab and Muslim nations believe Americans share their values.

Conyers said U.S. policy after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks hasn't helped the United States' image, and he drew hearty applause when he criticized "the despicable Patriot Act." Conyers said the act has allowed the Department of Justice to arrest Muslims, keep them separated from their families and hold them without charges, and that many in Congress are now pressing for changes.

"You cannot fight terrorism by employing unconstitutional tactics," Conyers said. "We have to observe the constitution, in war and in peace alike."

Conyers added that he is trying to strengthen hate crimes legislation to make it easier for prosecutors to target those who deface mosques, synagogues and churches.

Conyers said Democratic presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich was among those who helped sponsor the event, but Kucinich didn't attend Wednesday evening. Rep. Darrell Issa, a California Republican who is the grandson of Lebanese immigrants, did attend, along with the ambassadors of Kuwait, Malaysia, Yemen, Pakistan and Senegal.

Amina Makhdoom, 27, a consultant who lives in Falls Church, Va., said it's meaningful to have members of Congress recognize her religion "in such a positive and warm way."

"At a time like this, it goes a longer way than it might have two years ago," Makhdoom said.

Assil Ahmad, 25, who lives in Fairfax, Va., and is the son of Pakistani immigrants, said it's good for people outside his faith to watch him pray and understand what Ramadan is all about.

"The more that Muslims insert themselves into mainstream life in America, the better it is for everyone," he said.

Council on American-Islamic Relations, <http://www.cair-net.org>

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